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# CONTINENTAL PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION: PRESCRIPTIONS FOR A HEALTHY SUBDISCIPLINE

James K. A. Smith

Over the past decade there has been a burgeoning of work in philosophy of religion that has drawn upon and been oriented by “continental” sources in philosophy—associated with figures such as Martin Heidegger, Jacques Derrida, Emmanuel Levinas, Jean-Luc Marion, Gilles Deleuze, and others. This is a significant development and one that should be welcomed by the community of Christian philosophers. However, in this dialogue piece I take stock of the field of “continental philosophy of religion” and suggest that the field is developing some un-healthy patterns and habits. The burden of the paper is to suggest a prescription for the future health of this important field by articulating six key practices that should characterize further scholarship in continental philosophy of religion.

Plato is a friend, but truth is a greater friend.

—Husserl’s marginal comment in his personal copy of  
Heidegger’s *Sein und Zeit*<sup>1</sup>

Over the past decade there has been a burgeoning of work in philosophy of religion that has drawn upon and been oriented by “continental” sources in philosophy—associated with figures such as Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Jacques Derrida, Emmanuel Levinas, Jean-Luc Marion, Gilles Deleuze, Gianni Vattimo, and many others. One could identify the rumbling of this thirty years ago in Jean-Luc Marion’s landmark work, *L’idole et la distance* (1977) or in the earlier and influential work of Jewish philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas.<sup>2</sup> In fact, elements of such “continental” (or more specifically, phenomenological) engagements with religious phenomena can already be seen in Husserl and Heidegger.<sup>3</sup> In North America, this

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<sup>1</sup>See “Husserl’s Marginal Remarks in Martin Heidegger’s *Being and Time*,” trans. Thomas Sheehan, in Edmund Husserl, *Psychological and Transcendental Phenomenology and the Confrontation with Heidegger* (1927–1931) (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1997), p. 270. Heidegger’s *Being and Time* was dedicated to Husserl.

<sup>2</sup>For helpful discussion, see Jeffrey L. Kosky, *Levinas and the Philosophy of Religion* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001).

<sup>3</sup>Rudolf Schmitz-Perrin notes the religious motivation behind Husserl’s phenomenology in “La phenomenology et ses marges religieuses: la correspondance d’Edmund Husserl,” *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 25 (1996), pp. 481–488. For a helpful overview of the early Heidegger on these matters, see Merold



continental impetus has generated a lively discourse and secondary literature. One might suggest that the 1997 publication of John D. Caputo's *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida* was something of a "coming out" party for a field or sub-discipline sometimes referred to as "continental philosophy of religion"<sup>4</sup>—though such discourse had already been sustained in the work of Robert Sokolowski, Merold Westphal, Carl Raschke, Adriaan Peperzaak, Mark Taylor and others.<sup>5</sup> And it has only continued to grow.

I think this is a significant development and one that should be welcomed by the community of Christian philosophers. Continental figures provide unique theoretical frameworks and resources for "faith seeking understanding"<sup>6</sup> (not least because so many continental figures, such as Heidegger and Levinas, were significantly shaped by religious imaginations, even if their relationship to religious institutions was tenuous). There are important resonances, for instance, between the hermeneutic tradition stemming from Heidegger, Gadamer, and Ricoeur and both

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Westphal, "Heidegger's 'Theologische Jugendschriften,'" *Research in Phenomenology* 27 (1997), pp. 247–261.

<sup>4</sup>I have no stake in defending this nomenclature, and grant that the category of "continental" is contested. Nonetheless, I think the term has a heuristic value and it has become a standard reference. See, for instance, Philip Goodchild, "Continental Philosophy of Religion: An Introduction," in *Rethinking Philosophy of Religion: Approaches from Continental Philosophy*, ed. Philip Goodchild (Bronx, NY: Fordham University Press, 2002), pp. 1–39; *Explorations in Contemporary Continental Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Deane-Peter Baker and Patrick Maxwell (Dordrecht: Rodopi, 2003); Merold Westphal, "Continental Philosophy of Religion" in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Religion*, ed. William J. Wainwright (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 472–493; *Self and Other: Essays in Continental Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Eugene Thomas Long (Dordrecht: Springer, 2007) [a reprint of *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, Vol. 60, Nos. 1–3 (2006)]; and Nick Trakakis, "Meta-Philosophy of Religion: The Analytic-Continental Divide in Philosophy of Religion," *Ars Disputandi* [<http://www.ArsDisputandi.org>] 7 (2007), esp. §§45–57. Cp. also *The Religious*, *Blackwell Readings in Continental Philosophy*, ed. John D. Caputo (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001).

<sup>5</sup>John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion Without Religion* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1997); Robert Sokolowski, *Eucharistic Presence: A Study in the Theology of Disclosure* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1994); Merold Westphal, *Overcoming Onto-Theology*, *Perspectives in Continental Philosophy* (Bronx, NY: Fordham University Press, 2001); Adriaan Peperzak, *Ethics as First Philosophy: The Significance of Emmanuel Levinas for Philosophy, Literature, and Religion* (London: Routledge, 1995). Without any hope of being comprehensive, one should also note the work of Carl Raschke, Charles Winquist, Mark C. Taylor and many others. See particularly *Deconstruction and Theology*, ed. Raschke (New York: Crossroad, 1982) and idem., ed., *New Dimensions in Philosophical Theology* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1982). One might argue, as Trakakis does (§46), that this flourishing of continental philosophy of religion represents the materialization of what Merold Westphal called for in an early essay, "Prolegomena To Any Future Philosophy of Religion Which Will Be Able to Come Forth as Prophecy," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 4 (1973), pp. 129–150.

<sup>6</sup>Contra R. R. Reno, "Theology's Continental Captivity," *First Things* (April 2006), pp. 26–33.

Catholic theological emphases on the role of tradition and Reformed epistemology's emphasis on "control beliefs" that govern knowing. Or Husserl's phenomenological framework provides helpful theoretical tools for considerations of religious experience.<sup>7</sup> And of late, voices in European philosophy have turned their attention to specifically religious figures and texts: from Derrida's engagements with Kierkegaard and Augustine, to Badiou's and Agamben's provocative readings of St. Paul.<sup>8</sup>

A scan of *Faith and Philosophy* or a skim of recent programs of the Society for Christian Philosophers might not (yet) indicate this, but this growing field has generated important alternative or specialized venues for scholarship and conversation.<sup>9</sup> The Society for Continental Philosophy and Theology hosts stand-alone conferences and sessions in collaboration with the APA, ACPA, and SPEP.<sup>10</sup> In addition, the American Academy of Religion is home to the Theology and Continental Philosophy Group. And meetings of the Society of Christian Philosophers at both the APA and AAR have been increasingly open to continental philosophy of religion. Work in continental philosophy of religion has appeared in leading ("mainstream") journals such as *Faith and Philosophy* and *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*,<sup>11</sup> as well as journals such as *Modern Theology* and the *Journal for Cultural Theory and Religious Theory*.<sup>12</sup> There are also several book series that have been primary venues for the field, particularly the Indiana Series in Philosophy of Religion (edited by Merold Westphal), Fordham University Press's "Perspectives in Continental Philosophy" Series (edited by

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<sup>7</sup>In addition to Otto's classic work, *The Idea of the Holy*, cp. more recent proposals in this vein such as James K. A. Smith, *Speech and Theology: Language and the Logic of Incarnation* (London: Routledge, 2002) and Anthony J. Steinbock, *Phenomenology and Mysticism: The Verticality of Religious Experience* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007).

<sup>8</sup>Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Giorgio Agamben, *The Time that Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, trans. Patricia Dailey (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005); Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, trans. Ray Brassier (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

<sup>9</sup>Given that many programs which emphasize continental philosophy are housed in Catholic universities, one expects something different from the American Catholic Philosophical Association and the *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*. While both have long made room for phenomenology and existentialism, I don't think either have been host to much work in what we're calling "continental philosophy of religion"—at least no more than the SCP and *Faith and Philosophy*.

<sup>10</sup>For more info see <http://www.scptonline.org>. The fruit of SCPT conferences can be seen in books such as *The Phenomenology of Prayer*, ed. Bruce Ellis Benson and Norman Wirzba (Bronx, NY: Fordham University Press, 2005) and *Transforming Philosophy and Religion: Love's Wisdom*, ed. Norman Wirzba and Bruce Ellis Benson, Indiana Series in Philosophy of Religion (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008).

<sup>11</sup>See *Self and Other*, ed. Long, for a selection of essays from *IJPR*.

<sup>12</sup>The *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* has quickly become one of the primary hosts of conversations in continental philosophy of religion. It is published at <http://www.jcrt.org>.

John D. Caputo), and most recently, the Columbia University Press series, "Insurrections: Critical Studies in Religion, Politics, and Culture" (edited by Slavoj Žižek, Clayton Crockett, Creston Davis, Jeffrey W. Robbins).

Suffice it to say, continental philosophy of religion is a lively and growing field (one might be tempted to say "industry"). Furthermore, I think the field of continental philosophy of religion has enough of a history—and certainly enough momentum—that some critical reflection on "the state of the field" is warranted. In this brief piece, intended to stimulate dialogue, I want to briefly and selectively take stock of the field of continental philosophy of religion and suggest that the field is developing some un-healthy patterns that threaten to compromise its viability as a properly scholarly conversation. In particular, I worry that the field is becoming increasingly insular, reactionary, and (ironically<sup>13</sup>) monolithic.

The burden of this brief essay is to suggest a bit of a prescription for the future health of this important field.<sup>14</sup> This is offered as an essay, and makes no claims to being comprehensive or exhaustive. Instead, it works from impressions of certain trends in the field as seen from the perspective of one immersed in the conversation. It is offered in the spirit of dialogue. In particular, I will address six areas of concern; more specifically, I will suggest that if continental philosophy of religion is to grow and advance—and be heard at the larger philosophical table—it is imperative that continental philosophers of religion develop six key habits or practices of scholarship.

1. *Continental philosophers of religion should seek training and formation that is rigorous, pluralistic, and rooted in the history of philosophy.* The shape of scholarship in continental philosophy of religion is, to some extent, an effect of the training that continental philosophers of religion receive. So if continental philosophy of religion exhibits worrisome patterns, we do well to consider the formation and education of those working in the field. That is, we need to carefully consider the shape of the "curriculum," so to speak. In this respect, I think that some of the worst habits that are exhibited in continental philosophy of religion (insularity, a propensity to retreat to enclaves, and an ironic hostility to difference and critique) are to some extent products of graduate training that exhibit the same characteristics. Some continental philosophers of religion receive training in departments of religious studies that lack rigorous structures of account-

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<sup>13</sup>I say "ironically" because so much of continental philosophy is taken with the notion of "difference," including continental philosophy of religion. And yet it seems to me that much of what we get in the name of difference is just more of the same; and in fact, the conversations tend to be inhospitable to approaches that call into question the regnant paradigms.

<sup>14</sup>In doing so, I don't mean to take on the mantle of paternalistic physician (to which critics will no doubt reply, "Heal thyself!"). I recognize that even suggesting this critique seems to put me in the position of someone who thinks they have "authority" to speak to "the field." In fact, I don't presume such (I resisted the temptation to title this "Advice to Continental Philosophers"! ). Instead, as a practitioner invested in the field, I want merely to offer an anecdotal diagnosis of the field and suggest some practices in response. Both are offered in the spirit of "conversation starters."

ability in philosophy, particularly the history of philosophy; the result can sometimes be a kind of philosophy without accountability.<sup>15</sup> Others (like myself) are trained in philosophy programs that are exclusively “continental” and thus insulated from (and often hostile to) broader discussions in (analytic) philosophy of religion. But it seems to me that philosophy of religion will profit from structures and education that brings together the resources and riches of both analytic and continental approaches. Granted, I think this also entails some revised habits and practices in analytic philosophy of religion, which is *de facto* the majority culture in philosophy of religion and which would do well to find in continental philosophy of religion a partner in its work. But this should also be reciprocated: those engaged in continental philosophy of religion should be looking for training and formation that will enable them to engage philosophers of religion more broadly. This will require both learning a sort of “second language” as well as a stance that sees analytic philosophy of religion as a legitimate project (though not impervious to critique). Such collaboration will not be well-served by caricatures or stereotypes from either side.<sup>16</sup> And it seems to me that graduate school—a particularly intense period of formation where deep-grained habits take hold—is the place to form good, generous habits of collaboration and conversation. This requires an environment, resources, and curriculum to sustain such formation.

I would suggest that continental philosophy of religion would be strengthened and deepened if those seeking training in the field matriculated in graduate programs in philosophy that are intentionally pluralistic, providing training not only in continental philosophy but also the history of philosophy as well as the *lingua franca* of philosophy of religion today, which will require training in analytic philosophy as well. Graduate formation will be the first opportunity to enact study and conversation across the analytic-continental divide. Those being formed in graduate programs of religion or religious studies would do well to enter programs and departments which have constructive relationships with philosophy departments.

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<sup>15</sup>I owe this phrase to my colleague Lee Hardy (who, admittedly, was discussing much of the work that happens in “theory” programs in literature).

<sup>16</sup>For example, I don’t think it is constructive to denigrate logical or propositional analysis as such, even if continental philosophers of religion will worry about a reductionism that sometimes attends such models. Consider, for instance, this take on the situation from John D. Caputo: “The talk about God and religion in contemporary continental philosophy bears almost no resemblance to what passes for traditional ‘philosophy of religion.’ The latter has typically concerned itself with offering proofs for the immortality of the soul and for the existence of God. . . . This tradition, which goes back to the scholastic debates of the high middle ages, is largely perpetuated today in the works of contemporary Anglo-American philosophers, who offer the old wine of metaphysical theology in the new bottles of analytic philosophy. . . . We on the continental side of this divide have sworn off that sort of thing” (Caputo, “Introduction” to *The Religious*, 2). Construals of the terrain in philosophy of religion such as John Caputo’s recent analysis are not particularly conducive to the kind of collaboration I’m suggesting here. Nor are they encouraged by the caricatures of postmodern thought proffered by, say, Alvin Plantinga in *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 422–437.



2. *Continental philosophers of religion should consistently submit their work to the rigors of peer-review and re-value the journal article as a central arena for discourse.* Here my concern is the proliferation of edited volumes of essays that increasingly seem to be the publishing venue of choice in continental philosophy of religion.<sup>17</sup> (And I say this as one who has both edited and contributed to such collections.) While such edited volumes are published by university presses and include important, constructive work, as can be the case in any field, the process of peer-review for such volumes seems to sometimes lack the same rigor and controls as journals.<sup>18</sup> Instead, such collections tend to be repetitions of the usual suspects—and also tend to be quite predictable, merely new riffs on an established line. In addition, the proliferation of edited volumes results in the loss of any “center of gravity” for the conversation in continental philosophy of religion. Because discussions are sequestered in books, we lose the opportunity to cultivate journals as “go-to” venues for ongoing conversations (as, for instance, *Faith and Philosophy* has ‘hosted’ ongoing discussions of Reformed epistemology, *Religious Studies* has been the go-to venue for discussion of miracles, etc.). Furthermore, edited volumes lack the opportunity for continuing a critical conversation that publication in peer-reviewed journals offers. Continental philosophers of religion would serve the conversation by submitting to the rigors (and frustrations!) of peer-reviewed, journal-based publishing.

3. *Continental philosophers of religion should seek to publish their work in more “mainstream” channels.* One of the most detrimental trends in continental philosophy of religion is a set of habits that encourages “preaching to the choir” (this is related to point 4 below). The field tends to retreat to enclaves, setting up alternative societies and meetings and publishing in “friendly” (read: “controlled”) venues. The result is a sectarian insularity: continental philosophers of religion talk only to themselves. Granted, I think the same is true in the majority culture of analytic philosophy of

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<sup>17</sup>See, for example, a number already cited (in notes 5 and 10) as well as *Post-Secular Philosophy: Between Philosophy and Theology*, ed. Philip Blond (London: Routledge, 1998); *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism*, ed. John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999); *Questioning God*, ed. John D. Caputo, Mark Dooley, and Michael J. Scanlon (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001); *Religion Without Religion: The Prayers and Tears of John D. Caputo*, ed. James H. Olthuis (London: Routledge, 2002); *Religious Experience and the End of Metaphysics*, ed. Jeffrey Bloechl (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2003); *The Experience of God: A Postmodern Response*, ed. Kevin Hart and Barbara Wall (Bronx, NY: Fordham University Press, 2005); *After God: Richard Kearney and the Religious Turn in Continental Philosophy*, ed. John Panteleimon Manoussakis (Bronx, NY: Fordham University Press, 2006); and *Transcendence and Phenomenology*, ed. Conor Cunningham and Peter M. Candler, Jr. (London: SCM Press, 2007).

<sup>18</sup>For instance, peer-review of edited volumes is almost never double-blind; furthermore, it is more easily commandeered by networks of nepotism. (It’s difficult for me to be more specific about this without compromising the peer-review process.) That said, I have no illusions about peer-review as some kind of guarantee for quality scholarship. Granted, analytic philosophy is not immune to problems in this regard.

religion, which is usually just as insulated from dissenting voices. The result on both sides is a kind of tribal insularity. As a result, they often encounter little resistance or critique—a state of affairs that is generally detrimental to good scholarship. But equally importantly, by working and publishing in such enclaves, continental philosophers of religion are also missing opportunities to encounter, challenge, and contribute to broader conversations in philosophy of religion.

By seeking to present their work in venues that are more broadly constituted (regional meetings of the Society of Christian Philosophers, the Philosophy of Religion Section of the AAR, etc.), and by aiming to publish in more mainstream journals (such as *Faith and Philosophy*, *Religious Studies*, *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, etc.), continental philosophers of religion will both open themselves to critique (which is a scholarly virtue) and create opportunities to contribute to the field as a whole (including the opportunity to critique regnant paradigms on their own turf, rather than getting away with caricatured critiques within a safe enclave that is little more than an echo chamber).<sup>19</sup> This will require doing some translation work, relinquishing the ease and comfort of in-house jargon, but without requiring that we relinquish the unique “genius” of continental sources and traditions of inquiry.<sup>20</sup>

4. *Continental philosophers of religion should move beyond the “essay” and take responsibility for literature review as integral to their work.* As a continental philosopher of religion, I must confess to one facet of “analytic envy”: I have been deeply impressed by the tight sense of the “state of the field” that characterizes certain subfields of analytic philosophy. In particular, conversations in analytic philosophy always begin with a literature review that considers the *status quaestionis* for a particular question or problem. Every article must make an original contribution to the field, and in order to make an *original* contribution it needs to (a) take account of all earlier, relevant contributions and (b) make an argument that *advances* this contribution. Granted, for many philosophers this is standard practice. But I have been struck by the common absence of such a practice in continental philosophy of religion. In particular, “essays” in continental philosophy of religion offer “new” perspectives that often fail to take

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<sup>19</sup>My criticism of certain trends in continental philosophy of religion is by no means intended to give a “free pass” to analytic philosophy of religion. Nor am I suggesting that continental philosophy of religion would “get it right” if it would just get in line with the analytic school. I have articulated a different critique of trends in analytic philosophy of religion in James K. A. Smith, “Philosophy of Religion Takes Practice: Liturgy as Source and Method in Philosophy of Religion,” in *Contemporary Practice and Method in Philosophy of Religion: New Essays*, ed. David Cheetham and Rolfe King (London: Continuum, 2008), pp. 133–147.

<sup>20</sup>When I review (and, sadly, often reject) “continental” articles for various philosophy of religion journals, I usually point authors to the work of Merold Westphal as an exemplar of just what I’m describing here. For just two examples, see Merold Westphal, “Taking Plantinga Seriously,” *Faith and Philosophy* 16 (1999), pp. 173–181; and idem., “Christian Philosophers and the Copernican Revolution,” in *Christian Perspectives on Religious Knowledge*, ed. C. Stephen Evans and Merold Westphal (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), pp. 161–179.



account of either (a) earlier contributions that make the same argument or (b) earlier arguments that have already demonstrated the paucity or faulty nature of the supposedly “new” contribution. Continental philosophy of religion could be revolutionized if we would just adopt the literature review as a standard procedure—and if the peer-review process required this for publication.

5. *Continental philosophers of religion should move beyond “victimhood” and embrace critique.* Continental philosophers of religion—like “continental philosophers” in general—tend to construe certain types of criticism of their work as a kind of persecution for their “continental” commitments. As such, we tend to assume a “victim” mentality—which then drives our retreat into insulated enclaves and the comfort of the choir. Granted, the philosophical establishment in North America is governed by “analytic” practices and assumptions. And I would also grant that, at times, this does translate into biases and prejudices that ideologically reject continental discourse. However, not all critique is ideologically-driven; some of it is *philosophically* warranted. And continental philosophers should welcome *that* kind of critique, for it is philosophical critique that advances the field.

6. *Continental philosophy of religion should encourage authentic pluralism.* Despite mantras of “difference,” I have been struck by a creeping hegemony in contemporary continental philosophy of religion. The field has developed an oddly monolithic flavor—one that tends to be dominated by a particular version of “religion” or spirituality that is allergic to the determinate religious institutions and traditions. In most cases this stems from a certain Derridean understanding of “religion without religion,” but it can also be informed by the work of Vattimo or others.<sup>21</sup> Philosophies of religion that would be more properly Catholic are almost ruled out of court; indeed, they will be considered “unorthodox” vis-à-vis the regnant orthodoxy of “religion without religion” or “secular” theology.<sup>22</sup> But such a narrow and monolithic construal of the field is debilitating for the con-

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<sup>21</sup>Other streams are developing, including work in philosophy of religion in dialogue with non-phenomenological figures such as Deleuze, Žižek, and Badiou.

<sup>22</sup>For instance, nothing raises the hackles of continental philosophers of religion more than Radical Orthodoxy. See, for instance, Clayton Crockett’s “Introduction” to *Religion and Violence in a Secular World*, ed. Clayton Crockett (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2006), pp. 10–13; John D. Caputo, “What Do I Love When I Love My God? Deconstruction and Radical Orthodoxy,” in *Questioning God*, ed. John D. Caputo, Michael Scanlon, and Mark Dooley (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), pp. 291–317, and the recent exchange between Elizabeth Castelli and Graham Ward in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 74 (2006), pp. 179–193. The one thing that is heterodox for continental philosophy of religion is orthodoxy. I hope to elsewhere encourage a constructive dialogue on this point. See also my concerns expressed in “The Logic of Incarnation: Towards a Catholic Postmodernism,” in *The Logic of Incarnation: James K. A. Smith’s Critique of Postmodern Religion*, ed. Neal DeRoos and Brian Lightbody (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2009), pp. 3–37.

versation. Continental philosophers of religion should seek to encourage a bigger tent and foster a genuine pluralism within the field.

My sense and hope is that the field of continental philosophy of religion is healthy enough to absorb critical discussion of our own habits and practices. This dialogue essay is offered as a means to get the conversation started, with the hope and desire of strengthening an important field within philosophy of religion.

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